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ABANDONED RUINS

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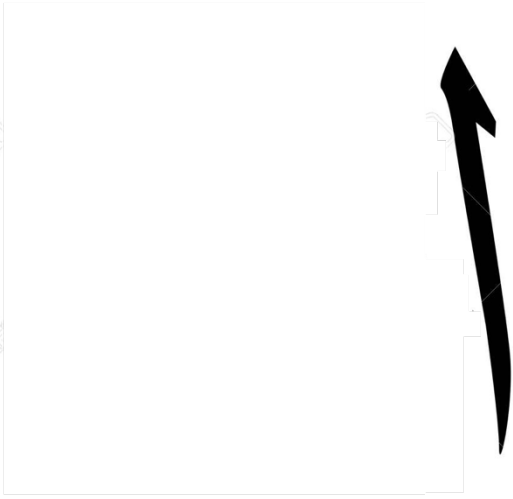

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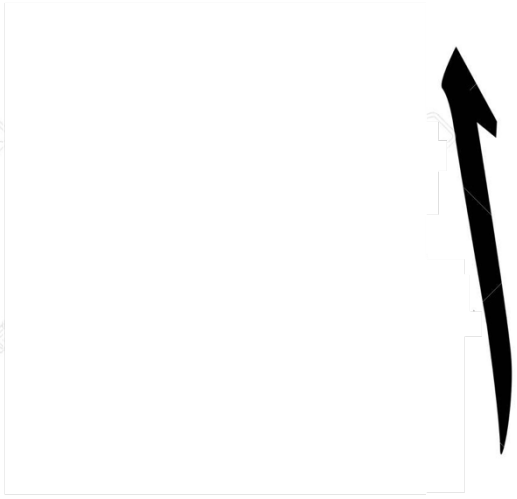

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1. HIDDEN GRAMMAR

* * *

At first light, I face east.
Not because the west is cursed, and not because God owns a direction. I do it because the body remembers what the mind forgets. Some mornings, greeting the sun is simply my way of admitting that the night did not finish the job.
I have seen light used badly: searchlights, drone screens, hospital bulbs over the dying, cameras that turn pain into product. Brightness alone does not impress me. I want to know what the light asks of the person standing in it.
Guide me without blinding me. Show me what is there without putting anyone on display. Warm what can be warmed. Find the person before the target.
And on the mornings when all of that sounds too grand, I follow the thin line under the door.

* * *

A deck of cards is a calendar small enough to lose in a coat pocket.
The resemblance is old and a little too neat: four suits, four seasons; thirteen ranks; fifty-two cards. I do not take the arithmetic as revelation. I like it because ordinary objects pick up meanings the way wool picks up smoke.
A spoon keeps the shape of a hand. A shoe keeps the memory of a road. A card can bring back a table, a winter, the person who kept shuffling because nobody knew what else to say.
Do not ask me to choose a card. Ask me which season my grief belongs to, or why every respectable calendar still needs a fool.
The joker may understand time better than the king does. Years do not move in straight lines; they circle back wearing different shoes.

* * *

They say there are palm leaves somewhere with whole lives written into them.
A thumbprint, a bundle, a priest turning leaf after leaf until one seems to know the stranger in front of him: parents, siblings, old injuries, habits, futures, remedies.
I do not need the claim to survive a laboratory. The image is enough for me. We keep trying to read ourselves in things that can rot or break: tea leaves, cards, stars, palms, the way somebody pauses before saying our name.
If my life were on a leaf, I would leave the date of my death alone. I would ask harder questions. Did grief make me mean? How often did I mistake a map for a person? Which kindness kept moving after I had forgotten it?
Maybe the record is simpler than the story. We copy ourselves into other people all the time: a wound passed on or stopped, a kindness repeated, a sentence remembered years later in a room we never see.

***

The old books loved their instruments: blade, cup, ring, rod, cord, garment, incense, hour.

I want less grandeur from them now.

Blade: help me separate a lie from a wound. Do not teach me to cut a neighbor from the table.

Cup: hold water for whoever is frightened.

Ring: remind me what I promised when the promise becomes inconvenient.

Rod: be a walking stick before you become a weapon.

Cord: keep me tied to the dead without tying tomorrow shut.

Tools are not innocent, but neither are they destiny. The hunger in the hand matters more than the object.

Before I pick anything up, I ask: will this leave me more human?

If the answer is no, it can stay on the table.

* * *

Old calendars gave the hours planets, colors, metals, angels, gates. They treated time as if it had grain, the way wood does.

I do not know if they measured any of it correctly. I only know that one hour can be nothing like the next.

There is a moment when an apology can still get through before pride bolts the door; a moment when a child finally speaks, when an old man will accept help if nobody makes a scene of it. Grief has its moments too, when it loosens enough to be held.

The sky does not have to look important for the moment to matter.

Sometimes goodness looks embarrassingly ordinary: dishes in the sink, an unread message, the neighbor who has gone quiet, a mother at the same window for too long.

That is when I go.

That is when I knock.

If I still use the word magic, this is close to what I mean: good timing, and enough mercy to act on it.

***

One night I imagined my shadow sitting across from me, exhausted.
It had followed me through polished answers and performances of being fine, through rooms where I made the wound behave. It put its elbows on the table. For once, it had nothing to say.
I made tea. I did not know what else to do.
For years I called it a demon because the word gave the problem a shape. Now I wonder how many demons are emotions left outside too long, or old defenses that never heard the war was over. Some look less like monsters than children in dark coats, still asking why nobody came back.
I am not trying to make darkness beautiful. Some appetites empty houses; some habits eat years. But an ugly feeling is not automatically an enemy. Sometimes it is only a messenger that has forgotten how to speak gently.
I asked what it had been guarding.
It pointed, not dramatically, to somewhere behind my ribs.

There was grief there, still trying not to breathe too loudly.
We sat with the tea until morning.

* * *

The Good Witch of Sleep

To sleep, I practice trust before I feel it.

I loosen my jaw and open my hands. The body is an animal; orders only make it flinch. I have learned to approach it sideways.

I turn the lamp down.

Tomorrow can stay closed for a few hours.

I give the dead back to God for the night.

I let the dark touch me without deciding it means danger.

Sometimes courage is only posture. Sleep comes easier when surrender stops sounding like defeat.

I speak to myself as a caretaker, not a warden.

Nothing supernatural has to happen.

My breathing slows.

The mattress does its ordinary work.

Tonight, ordinary is enough.

* * *

The Machine That Wants My Fear

The machine I worry about does not need gears.
It runs on attention: outrage, fear, the nervous system checking the same locked door again and again. It serves disaster in a bright little rectangle and calls the serving knowledge.
Most of the fear is not invented. That is what makes the machine convincing. A war becomes footage; a body becomes a clip; responsibility thins into stimulation.
I will not use that as an excuse to look away. But I need to know when I am witnessing and when I am merely consuming.
Witness should change something I do after I look.
Consumption mostly changes how haunted I feel.
So before I reach for the glowing bowl again, I ask a plain question:
Will this make me any more useful to the living?
If not, I put the phone down.

II. MACHINES, MIRRORS, AND REPUBLICS

* * *

A careless name can bruise a life for decades. A false one can harden into a border. Bureaucracy can take a family and flatten it into a category tidy enough for the evening news.

I have watched holy words get used until I could barely hear the holiness in them: ancient symbols dragged through present hatred, prayers spoken by governments and handed back to the public as permission.

So before I use a loaded word, I try to feel its temperature. Who carried it before me? Who said it at a kitchen table, with flour on her hands? What history is missing from the dictionary entry?

Some names I will not wear as decoration. Some wounds do not belong in my atmosphere. Nobody should have to become evidence for my goodness.

When I name something, I want the person inside the name to feel less alone.

That is a spell I can live with.

* * *

Elegy for the Serious Ones

I mourn the serious ones.

The public servant
who still reads the appendix.

The teacher
buying pencils on the way home.

The nurse at 4:17 a.m.
calling a frightened stranger sweetheart
because no one else has arrived.

The legal-aid lawyer
carrying three files
and a sandwich gone warm.

The librarian
who keeps the difficult book
on the shelf.

A country fails hardest
on the people who kept trying
to make it decent.

When the loud men leave,
when the cameras move on,
when the ministry blames weather,
these are the ones
still holding the roof.

History will remember presidents.

God,
remember the person
who stayed late
to fix the form.

* * *

Province

The capital is usually the last to know.

The town knows when the factory closes.
It knows when the clinic becomes two bus rides
away, when the school roof meets another
winter with the same bucket under it.
It notices the shop that disappears, the train
that stops stopping, the young people leaving
with one suitcase and calling it opportunity
because leaving is easier to explain that way.

The capital eventually calls it data.

The town calls it Tuesday.

A country can come apart by timetable: one
bridge postponed, one doctor gone, one road left
another year, one promise converted into a
spreadsheet that nobody nearby can read.

It rarely looks like collapse while it is happening.

From a distance, someone will call it transition.

At the bus stop, a woman waits three hours and
calls her sister.

* * *

A poisoned city is never just one city.

It becomes a lesson in what neglect is allowed to cost.

Maintenance turns optional. Poor children become an acceptable risk. Pipes keep carrying what officials would rather stop talking about.

Neglect practices in small places before somebody turns it into policy:

a town where the water turns against the mouth,
a rural clinic waiting half a year for an X-ray part,
a county after the hospital closes,
an apartment where August kills an old person because the air was never fixed,
a bridge inspected, flagged, and put off again.

The fall is usually less mysterious than the report makes it sound.

Most of it is repair deferred.

The roof we planned to fund.
The pipe we planned to replace.
The life we said we would count later.

Later is a dangerous word in an institution.

***

A man pushes a shopping cart beneath the overpass, carrying winter with him.

Two blankets.
Cans in a grocery bag.
A picture frame with the glass gone.
One glove.

Above him, the stadium throws so much light into the clouds that night itself looks expensive.

The crowd sings.

He keeps moving.

I do not know his name. I wish that were not part of the point.

I have no use for patriotism that cannot survive looking at his face.

A flag above luxury glass is still only fabric if the person sleeping under it has nowhere safe to put the photograph.

***

The screen becomes the sky
when the sky becomes too honest.

The sky says:
smoke.

The screen says:
sale.

The sky says:
heat.

The screen says:
engagement.

The sky says:
look up.

The screen says:
stay with me.

A whole city
bends its neck
before a private moon.

Once, omens required weather.
Now an alert arrives
already interpreted,
already monetized,
already asking to be shared.

The soul was not built
for this much interruption.

No wonder silence
first feels like withdrawal.

* * *

The Mirror Learns to Eat

When a frightened society starts looking for a face to blame, it usually finds one.
Not a repair plan. Not the slow work of clinics, wages, schools, trains, roofs, water, apology. A face is easier. You can put it on television and shout at it over dinner.
At first the leader only reflects the room. He says aloud what people were embarrassed to admit, gives resentment a uniform, turns private disappointment toward a public enemy. Bitterness starts to sound patriotic. Exhaustion starts to sound like a mandate.

In a roadside diner, his mouth hangs above the counter on television all afternoon. A nurse stirs sugar into coffee that has gone cold. Her county clinic closed last winter; her mother now travels ninety minutes for bloodwork. She is not in love with cruelty. She is in love with the feeling that someone has finally noticed the insult of her life.
After the rally, a volunteer folds chairs. One chant embarrassed him. Then another. He is surprised by how quickly embarrassment becomes negotiable when everyone around him is clapping. He tells himself the ugly parts are strategy, that winning requires a few sentences he would never say at home.
Exhaustion can make a shortcut feel like revelation.
That is when the mirror changes.
Criticism becomes betrayal. Law becomes destiny. History becomes fake. The party, the court, the pulpit, the family dinner: all of it narrows around one man. The first thing to disappear is the supporter's hesitation, because hesitation is where conscience still keeps a spare key.

Eventually the crowd stops looking for itself in the mirror.
It looks for him.
A republic is in real danger when a lie becomes less frightening than the effort of finding out what is true.
* * *

III. WINTER RITES

* * *

On the coldest nights, with snow making a blank page of the ground, people start telling stories.
Quietly, at first.
The old people say the spirits sleep then, so winter gives permission for stories daylight makes embarrassing: the lamp that moved, the child in antlers, the names Salem tried to burn, the aunt who heard steps in an empty room and opened the door anyway.
A winter story is more than entertainment, though I am wary of making it sound holier than it is.
Sometimes it is simply insulation.
It tells the frightened person that somebody else has mistaken silence for abandonment too.
Outside, the trees write black lines across the snow. Inside, the fire keeps changing everyone's face, believer and skeptic alike.
Eventually somebody begins.
There was once a night so long that even the sun forgot its name.
The room leans in.
For a little while, that is enough.

* * *

Tonight the servant wears the crown.

Let the child question the judge.

Seat the curse at the table and ask it to explain itself.

I want reversal for diagnosis, not spectacle. Turn the room upside down and notice what falls out of its pockets.

Let the tyrant feel uncertain.
Put shame in the cheap chair.
Give the first question to the person who was made to stay quiet.

One night of mockery will not repair a hierarchy.

It might loosen the costume, though.

Sometimes truth gets in through the gap.

***

When the curse leaves, do not leave an empty table behind it.

Put down salt.
Apples.
Something hot in a bowl.
Water for the dead.
Tea for the living.

Keep a chair for the person who is not ready to talk.

Eat slowly.

The body has to learn that freedom does not always arrive like thunder.

Sometimes it is a warm bowl in winter,
a key left where you can see it,
boots drying by the door,
and a night in which nobody comes knocking with harm in a fist.

***

After the feast, no trumpet.

Bowls in the sink.
Salt near the knife.
Apple skins curling in on themselves.
The chair still warm from the person who finally sat down.

I know the rite mattered because, at some point,

the child fell asleep.

The house is not innocent.
It does not need to pretend to be.

The road is not safe.
It is open.

The dark is still there.
At least now we know what to call some of it.

Frost gathers on the steps.

Bread cools in the kitchen.

Morning comes without asking to be applauded.

IV. ROOMS AFTER ASH

* * *

Prayer of the Ash That Cooled

God of the ash after flame,
God of the room after shouting,
God of the hand that still trembles
and reaches for water anyway,

let me sit here
without asking grief to perform for me.

Tonight sorrow is quiet.
It has taken off its shoes
and sits by the window,
watching traffic move
as if the city has no idea
what happened in this room.

Teach me what cooling is for.

An ember is not a failure
because it stopped being flame.

Ash is what remains
when burning finally gives up
its claim to permanence.

What ended
does not need a shrine.

What died
does not have to become a chain.

If I become ash,
let me become soil.

If soil,
then maybe shade.

Just enough for one tired person
to sit down
and not feel the whole world closing.

* * *

Set the table low.

Let grief eat before anyone explains it.

Lentils.
Rice.
Bread.
Strong tea.
Fruit cut small for the children.
A chair for the person who has barely spoken since the funeral.

Communal food is theology with its sleeves rolled up, if theology is the word we need.

It says the body matters.
It says hunger is not private.
It asks love to become edible or admit that it is only beautiful talk.

Say the names of the dead without making the living apologize for still being hungry.

Then eat.

Not because grief is finished.

Because life has pulled up a chair beside it.

* * *

The city glows as if it swallowed lightning.

Glass towers.
Hospital windows.
Streetlights shaking in puddles.
Blue screens on exhausted faces.

The skyline is bright enough to erase the stars
and still not bright enough to comfort the
person sitting alone beneath it.

God of the atom and the apple seed,
of uranium underground
and milk warming on a stove,

teach us some sense of scale.

We split the smallest things and built artificial suns,
yet beside the dying
we still reach for the wrong sentence.

By dawn the towers look pale.

Birds return and make the machinery seem
briefly ridiculous.

For a minute,
let the city remember
how little light a person needs
to recognize another face.

***

The harder prayer, I think,
is for the living.

We are left with mail,
medicine,
sheets to wash,
forms to sign,
breakfast to make,
and anger that has to be survived
without letting it build a country in the chest.

Give us courage for ordinary hours.

Not the courage that photographs well.

The courage to walk past the hospital.
To laugh and not apologize to sorrow.
To answer the child.
To take out the bins.
To sleep.

Let grief have a chair.

Just not the wheel.

***

Under the different names,
somebody is thirsty.

Mercy.
Grace.
Compassion.
Liberation.
Truth.
Love.

We have spent centuries on opposite banks
arguing over the right word for water while,
downstream, somebody drinks mud.

Forgive us for that.

Let me drink
before I debate.

Wash
before I accuse.

Cross, if I can,
without burning the bridge behind me.

If faith is a river,
I hope it remembers
it was water
before anyone named the banks.

***

I used to think praise had to make noise.

A raised hand.
A crowded room.
A voice breaking open.

Now I notice quieter versions.

A spoon put beside a bowl.
A lamp left on for someone coming home.
A nurse turning the pillow to the cool side.
A man forgiving himself enough to call his daughter.
A widow opening the curtains before she feels ready.

Nobody announces these things.

Still, I want to say hallelujah

for the body that stayed,
for the meal somebody remembered,
for the laugh that slipped in by accident,
for the grave that did not take the whole house with it.

Praise can be that quiet.

It can improve a room and leave without explaining itself.

* * *

Joy comes in with dust on its hem.

It knows the hospital smell,
the chair beside the grave,
the city at three in the morning
when every lit window feels like evidence.

So when joy shows up,
I do not make it prove that nothing bad
happened.

I give it a plate.

An apricot ripens.
A child runs into rain.
An old man feeds birds with the concentration
of a priest.
The sea keeps lifting itself into morning.

Everyone I love will one day
go through a door I cannot hold open.

And still, somebody puts bread on the table.

Eat.

There is life left.

V. BROKEN HYMNS

* * *

If you forget who you are,

start with something your body already knows.

A scar.
A postcard.
The hinge on the old cupboard.
The way your hand finds a familiar door
before memory catches up.

Do not make every object prove itself.

Notice what warmth remains.

If a voice calls you back,
answer it kindly,
but do not hand over your freedom.

If sleep comes,
let it be sleep, not surrender.

If grief comes,
make room,
but keep a key for yourself.

And if none of that works,
make tea.

Hold the cup until your hands remember
that they belong to somebody living.

* * *

I kept poems behind my teeth.

Apologies.
Hallelujahs.
The sentence I should have said
before the door shut.

My tongue became a storeroom for unfinished things.

I kissed with it.
Lied with it.
Kept the peace with it
when peace was only fear with better manners.

When they asked why I never sang,
I had no way to show them
what silence had packed behind the molars.

So I write for people
who swallowed whole orchestras
just to get through a room.

Let the page carry
what the mouth could not carry safely.

***

There is a moth in the moon, or I keep thinking there is, and nobody mentions it.

A flicker.
Something wing-shaped at the edge of certainty.

You look up and the sky is beautiful without volunteering an explanation.

I have thrown prayers at it: whispers, questions. Once I asked whether the stars remembered my grandmother.

One looked brighter for a second.
Another disappeared.

I do not know what either thing meant.

Probably nothing.

I kept looking anyway.

If I disappear with my face turned upward, say this:

the sky never explained itself,

and I never quite stopped listening.

* * *

Ode to the Ruined Joy

You smile
like someone who has already heard
the train announcement.

Your laughter tastes of cigarettes,
cold platforms,
Sunday after everybody has gone home.

There is a photograph of you dancing in an
empty station.

No music that I can see.

One shoe untied.

The departure board glowing over your shoulder.

That is the kind of joy I trust.

Not clean.
and not permanent.
Not proof that nothing happened.

Joy with a limp,
already late for somewhere.

I keep the photograph close,

not on the wall so much as somewhere near the breath.

***

Lantern Makers

In every wounded city,
somebody is still making light.

A woman worries the last clean match alive under a stove.

A father tells the same bad joke because the children are studying his face.

A nurse cups a hand around the small blue flame of a vein.

A neighbor opens the door and says,

Come in.
Eat first.

Nobody calls them lantern makers.

Better that way.

The room changes anyway.

CODA

* * *

The Pencil Prayer

May I remove
before I add.

Look longer
before I decide.

Trust the image
a little longer than the explanation.

Leave
before I start performing the leaving.

Love the whole book
more than the line I am proudest of.

And when I cannot hear the poem anymore,

send me back to water boiling,
bread cooling,
birds arguing,
somebody sweeping a floor

until language remembers
it came from ordinary mouths.

Support the Artist

For Those Who Wish to Give: